

Drivers of Social Media Discontinuance: A Systemic Review

Jing Wang^{1, 2, a}, Salman Ali^{3, b}

¹Infrastructure University Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

²Zhengzhou University of Technology, China

³Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Malaysia

^a223923799@s.iukl.edu.my, ^basalmanphd@gmail.com

Abstract

Social media discontinuance has become an increasingly common behavior as users choose to discontinue using platforms. However, limited syntheses exist that integrate and contextualize the diverse research on this phenomenon and its experiences. This scoping review examines 28 articles published between 2015 and 2024, focusing on the primary drivers of social media discontinuance. Through the synthesis of existing studies across various cultural and geographical settings, the review identifies three key domains that influence users' decisions to discontinue social media use: user-related factors, information-related factors, and tech-related factors. The findings highlight that motivations for discontinuance are multifaceted, encompassing emotional, psychological, and technological aspects, which vary depending on individual, content, and platform characteristics. This review offers a comprehensive understanding of social media discontinuance drivers, providing valuable insights for future research and platform development.

Keywords

Social media discontinuance, drivers, user-related, information-related, tech-related.

1. Introduction

Scholars and professionals have been quite interested in the phenomena of social media cessation in the past few years. Social media discontinuance has become a broad term used to describe various forms of withdrawal from social media platforms, whether voluntary or involuntary [1]. Social media and mobile technology have rapidly expanded, transcending geographical and temporal constraints to facilitate global connectivity [2]. Social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, WeChat and Weibo have fundamentally altered global interpersonal interactions and communication methods [3-6]. Serving as a revolutionary tool for communication and information dissemination, social media has profoundly impacted various facets of personal and professional life. Notably, it encourages users to establish connections, enhance self-esteem, lead more fulfilling lives, and provides increased opportunities for self-expression [7]. Additionally, it is commonly acknowledged that thriving social media platforms provide a wide range of demands for regular users, including those related to entertainment, social connection, information seeking, and opinion expressing [8, 9]. Consequently, social media has emerged as a dominant force in mass media over recent decades. Despite experiencing rapid growth, social media platforms now face the challenge of retaining users, with an increasing trend of users expressing their desire to discontinue mainstream social media platforms [10]. Based on statistical data, social media has recently faced unforeseen challenges and complications. The social media platform, Facebook, has witnessed a notable decrease in its global daily active users for the first time in its 18-year history [11]. In the fourth quarter of 2021, the count of daily active users on Facebook slightly declined to 1.929

billion, marking a minor decrease from the previous quarter [11]. Meanwhile, Twitter observed a reduction in its global monthly active users in 2023, totaling 353.9 million, indicating a 3.9% annual decrease [12]. This trend is particularly noticeable in China. The count of monthly active accounts on QQ has witnessed a decline for the third consecutive year, dropping from 647 million in 2019 to 552 million in 2021 [13]. This reflects a decrease of 14.7% over the specified period. Concurrently, Weibo faced its initial decrease in monthly active users in 2021, as the count dropped from 550 million in first quarter of 2021 to 511 million in the third quarter of 2021, reflecting a decline of 7.1% [14]. WeChat experienced an unprecedented decrease in monthly active users, declining from 1,288 million in the first quarter of 2022 to 1,262 million in the second quarter of 2022, marking a 2% reduction [15]. In terms of the worldwide daily time spend social networking, the figure has stayed consistent at 145 minutes per day for the third consecutive year [16]. This steadiness follows a period of substantial growth, with no observed increase from 2019 to 2022.

The increasing number of social media discontinuance incidents is becoming a barrier to the industry-wide development as it contributes in declining active user population across different social media platforms respectively [17, 18]. Therefore, it is essential to concentrate on the drivers of social media discontinuance. Investigations in this domain have examined some drivers of social media discontinuance including exhaustion [19, 20], guilt [21, 22], habit [23, 24], and excessive use [19, 25]. Besides, other studies has demonstrated the important factors of social media discontinuance, such as information overload [26, 27], information irrelevance [28], privacy concerns [23, 29], and system feature overload [27, 30].

Although recent studies provide valuable information about social media discontinuance, further research is needed to fully understand the drivers that shape such phenomenon [17, 31, 32]. As the study of social media discontinuance is still relatively new, the field would benefit from the existing reviews that frame current results and guide valuable insights. Overall, systematic reviews on drivers of social media discontinuance can offer insightful directions to researchers and practitioners to comprehensively understand the drivers of discontinuation. Therefore, the objective of this research is to summarize and analyze the existing research to provide the most comprehensive and up-to-date understanding of the drivers of social media discontinuance. Consequently, the objective of this research is to investigate the factors that drive social media discontinuance.

2. Social Media Discontinuance

Individuals often encounter fluctuations in their social media engagement, with some even opting for ceased social interaction, a phenomenon known as social media discontinuance [33]. Previous studies on social media have demonstrated that the three stages of social media life cycle adoption, usage, and discontinuation [34]. Among these phases, discontinuance refers to the choice made after continuation to stop using the service going forward [35]. In the social media life cycle, only the usage phase is determined by continuity, while the termination phase is determined by discontinuation [35]. Therefore, continuance play a key role in the post-adoption process. It is crucial to understand the behavior of discontinuance in depth to gain a thorough understanding.

The phenomenon of discontinuance has attracted much attention in the Communication and Information Systems literature, particularly as a post-adoption behavior [36]. The term “discontinuance” captures the user-level decision-making process of abandoning or reducing use of a particular social media platform [37]. Recent scholarship have deepen the understanding of social media discontinuance by positing it as a distinct behavioral pattern and examining different drivers and inhibitors of social media discontinuance [34, 38]. It is evident

that discontinuance is not simply the opposite of continuance. Discontinuance involves a multifaceted decision-making process, independent of the factors influencing continuance.

Previous researchers revealed various drivers of social media discontinuance [1, 32, 39-42]. It is crucial to exploring these drivers to gaining a comprehensive understanding of what predicts social media discontinuance. The decision to stop participating in social media activities depends on the whether the satisfaction of users is threatened, including user-related drivers [19, 20, 25], information-related drivers [26-28], and tech-related drivers [23, 29, 30].

3. Method

This study employed a systematic literature review approach to extensively investigate the existing literature on social media discontinuance to identify the drivers that influence such behavior. A systematic review is a comprehensive, unbiased, and structured approach to analyzing and summarizing existing research on a particular topic [43]. In contrast to traditional literature reviews, which tend to be more narrative and subjective, a systematic review follows a methodology to reduce bias and provide a clear and replicable summary of the available data [44]. The framework developed by Tranfield, Denyer [45], which is widely employed in a range of published reviews [46-49], was followed in the conduct of this study.

3.1. Search Strategy

The objective of this study was to explore all empirical investigations on the drivers of social media discontinuance. To achieve this objective, a comprehensive search strategy was designed to capture a wide range of relevant literature. First, the search was carried out across several major academic databases to ensure comprehensive coverage of the topic. Specifically, Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar were employed to index of peer-reviewed journals on the topic. Second, it is important to identifying key concepts and extracting relevant keywords from the existing literature on social media and discontinuance. The Boolean operator was applied to constructed a search string, using operator "OR" within alternatives of one keyword, and the "AND" operator to connect various keywords. The key terms for this article on social media are "social media", "social networks", and "social networking sites (SNS)". As for discontinuance, we used terms such as "discontinuance", "discontinuation", "quitting", "termination", "post-adoption", and "abandonment". The drivers were represented by keywords like "drivers", "factors", "reasons", and "motivations". Combining these terms using Boolean operators, a search string was constructed: ("social media" OR "social networks" OR "SNS") AND ("discontinuance" OR "discontinuation" OR "quit") AND ("drivers" OR "factors" OR "motivations").

3.2. Screening process

Following the search process, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied based on the research questions. The inclusion criteria identified publications that (1) focused on the drivers of social media discontinuance, (2) were empirical studies, (3) were written in English, and (4) were peer-review articles. Exclusion criteria eliminated studies that (1) did not explore the drivers of social media discontinuance, (2) lacked empirical evidence, (3) were written in languages other than English, or (4) were not peer-review articles.

The review period was limited to 2015-2024 to ensure a more nuanced understanding of social media discontinuance during this timeframe. The primary objective was to examine the drivers of social media discontinuance. Initially, databases' built-in functions were used to exclude non-empirical and non-English publications. The search yielded a total of 1,270 potentially relevant publications, with 903 from Scopus and 367 from Web of Science. Titles and keywords were reviewed to determine if the studies were relevant to the research question. In addition, inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to further refine the results. The final search

included only peer-reviewed journal articles published in English that focused on social media discontinuance and associated drivers. At the same time, studies unrelated to social media, particularly those in non-empirical research such as conference papers and dissertations, were excluded. After applying the predefined criteria, 127 studies were selected for full-text review. Duplicates were first eliminated, and then studies were screened in two steps. The initial screening involved reviewing the abstracts, followed by a comprehensive evaluation of the full texts. Ultimately, 28 articles were identified as meeting the specified inclusion and exclusion criteria.

3.3. Data extraction and coding

The data extraction for the systematic review was carefully designed to ensure that relevant information on drivers of social media discontinuance was captured comprehensively and accurately. Initially, it is crucial to create a detailed extraction form to systematically collect key data from each journal. This form was designed to record essential elements, including the authors, publication year, antecedents, dependent variables, social media platform, and country, as well as the theory of the research. Following data extraction, the coding process was conducted to categorize the extracted data and identify themes related to the drivers of social media discontinuance. Based on the research question, a coding framework was developed to categorize the different levels of drivers of social media discontinuance.

4. Results

The systematic review examined and analyzed 28 studies that met the inclusion criteria, providing valuable insights into the drivers of social media discontinuance across different platforms and demographic groups. The majority of the studies were conducted in China ($n = 15$), with the remaining studies conducted in other Asian countries (Chinese Taiwan = 1, India = 1, Indonesia = 1, Pakistan = 2), Europe (Finland = 4, Germany = 1, Portugal = 1), and the United States ($n = 1$). In terms of social media platforms, eight studies focused on Chinese platforms such as WeChat, WeChat Moment, Weibo, and Qzone. Facebook was the focus of five studies ($n = 5$), while Instagram was examined in one study ($n = 1$). Twelve studies explored social media in general, without specifying particular platforms. Table 2 presents the research context of these studies, detailing sources, antecedents, dependent variables, social media platforms, countries, and the theoretical frameworks employed in the research. The key themes related to user's motivation to social media discontinuance was organized into user-related drivers, information-related drivers, and tech-related drivers.

4.1. User-related Drivers

User-related drivers emerged as the most frequently reported motivational theme. The analysis delineates two primary user-related drivers, classified into emotional and behavioral drivers. These drivers are defined and exemplified based on existing literature. Emotional drivers are associated with the emotional responses and feelings that users experience. A significant number of user-related drivers fall under this category. For instance, exhaustion [19, 20, 42, 50] are extensively recognized emotional factors that influence social media engagement. Additional emotional factors involve experiencing guilt [21] from ignoring significant responsibilities and regret [19, 22] due to negative consequences resulting from social media use.

Additional emotional factors examined include dissatisfaction [24, 51], distress, and fear of missing out [52].

Many researches highlighted that behavioral drivers related to user-related factors are crucial in determining social media discontinuance. Behavioral drivers are associated with the specific patterns, habits, and changes in behavior exhibited by individuals. Habit [19, 21, 23, 24] and

excessive use [19, 25] are the most commonly observed behavioral drivers. Adhikari and Panda [53] and Turel [21] discovered a negative relationship between self-efficacy and social media discontinuance. While Masood, Feng [54] revealed that poor sleep quality positively predicts social media discontinuance. Additionally, Cao, Khan [20] highlighted that there have the positive relationship between cyberbullying and discontinuance.

4.2. Information-related Drivers

Information-related drivers involve the content characteristics of social media platforms. Whether users reduce or stop using social media depends on the nature, quality, and impact of the content. The most prevalent of the information-related drivers is information overload [1, 26-28, 30, 38, 42, 52, 55-59]. Pang and Ruan [28] posited that information irrelevance is a positive predictor of social media discontinuance. Their findings suggest that the presence of irrelevant information significantly influences users' decisions to social media discontinuance. Moreover, Xie and Tsai [39] claimed that various negative information-related incidents including advertising interference, rumor dissemination, and information equivocality, are positively associated with social media discontinuance. Additionally, Wu, Kao [57] argued that the higher levels of inconsistency in information are linked to an increased risk of social media discontinuance.

4.3. Tech-related Drivers

Tech-related drivers involve the design, technical features, and user experience of the platform. Such drivers for users to discontinue social media include functionality, usability, and interaction issues. The main tech-related driver of social media discontinuance is privacy concerns [23, 27, 29, 50, 53, 60, 61] and system feature overload [27, 30, 55, 58]. Moreover, Tan, Liu [51] revealed that technological conflicts have a positive impact on dissatisfaction, which in turn drives social media discontinuance. Furthermore, Maier, Laumer [34] discovered that there is a positive relationship between system complexity and social media discontinuance. Besides, Adhikari and Panda [53] posited that the ease of use of social networking platforms helps mitigate social media discontinuance. Their study further showed that the effect of ease of use in alleviating social media discontinuance was greater for men than for women.

5. Discussion

Social media discontinuance is a critical user behavior of social media platforms and it has a significant influence on the user engagement and organizational investment. A large user base is essential for stimulating content generation and attracting advertising revenue. This research underscores that social media discontinuance results from a complex interaction of factors, reflecting the intricate nature of user decisions to leave social media platforms. First, the findings of this research highlight that social media discontinuance involves three primary dimensions: user-related drivers, information-related drivers, and tech-related drivers. These dimensions can be divided into internal and external factors. Specifically, internal factors are user-related factors, while external factors include information-related and tech-related factors. The interactions among these dimensions are not straightforward but a complex and non-linear relationship. For instance, tech-related factors may affect user-related concerns, which in turn can increase social media discontinuance. Farooq, Dahabiyeh [23] found that privacy concerns on social media platforms foster distrust, which subsequently drives social media discontinuance. Similarly, factors within a single dimension can influence one another. For example, Pang and Ruan [28] found that dissatisfaction can mediate the effects of information irrelevance and information overload on social media discontinuance among WeChat users. Such interaction between factors at different levels highlights the complexity of the motivations for social media discontinuance. Second, Abdelwahab, Kent [62] posited that culture play a key

role in user behavior. Results show that social media research spans different countries and platforms, which represent different cultures. Existing studies on social media discontinuance conducted across different countries such as China [26, 27], Finland [23, 30], USA [21], and are based on various social media platforms including Facebook [1, 21, 24, 34], WeChat [19, 28, 56], Weibo [39, 58], and WhatsApp [23]. However, existing research lacks explanations for these differences in specific platform and country. The contribution of this research is to provide a perspective on how these differences, whether related to platform or country, can significantly influence the drivers of social media discontinuance.

This study also offers practical implications. Identifying drivers at three different levels provides a framework for social media service to understand the drivers of social media discontinuance and helps develop strategies to address it. To mitigate discontinuance at the user-related level, it is important to consider implementing features that personalize user experiences, such as tailored content recommendations and customized notifications. For instance, it is beneficial for platforms to employ algorithms to better match posts, which helps reducing social media discontinuance. Additionally, integrating usage management tools, like screen time trackers or reminders to take breaks, is a good way to prevent excessive use. On the information-related level, the relevance and quality of content can be improved by employing advanced filtering mechanisms to ensure that users receive more relevant and less redundant information. For example, platforms can reduce information overload by curating information streams based on user preferences and past interactions, while also maintaining engagement and reducing discontinuance by enabling users to customize content preferences and filter out irrelevant information. At the technological level, social media platforms can simplify layout design by simplifying the user interface and reducing functional complexity to prevent system overload. In addition, cybersecurity experts should strengthen privacy protection by improving the data protection measures to reduce the pressure to discontinue because of privacy issues.

6. Limitations and Future Directions

This systematic review needs to be considered within certain limitations. First, the review only included peer-reviewed journal articles, which may have overlooked relevant studies from other sources such as conference proceedings. Future reviews could benefit from including such papers to provide a comprehensive overview of social media discontinuance. Second, although this review aims to characterize the drivers of social media discontinuance, it ignores the relationship between the drivers of discontinuance and various platforms and countries. Future research can focus on the relationship between the drivers of social media discontinuance in different countries on the same platform, or different platforms in the same country. Despite these limitations, this review identifies research gaps in exploring social media discontinuance and provides a foundational framework for future research. By categorizing drivers into three different levels, this review aims to advance theoretical and practical understanding of the emerging field of social media discontinuance.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to identify drivers of social media discontinuance. To achieve this, a systematic review of the literature from 2015 to 2024 were conducted. The data were obtained from the databases including Web of Science, Scopus, and Google scholar. A total of 28 relevant studies were identified and analyzed in detail through a rigorous methodological framework. The findings categorize the drivers of social media discontinuance into three primary groups: user-related, information-related, and technology-related factors. User-related drivers are further subdivided into emotional and behavioral factors. This study offers a comprehensive

synthesis of the literature on social media discontinuance drivers, providing a robust foundation for future research into this phenomenon.

Table 1: Summary showing research context of the studies.

#	Source	Antecedents	Dependent Variable	Platform	Country	Theory
1	(Farooq et al., 2024)	Distrust (negative electronic word of mouth, negative offline word of mouth, privacy invasion), Inertia (affective commitment, switching cost and use habit)	Discontinuance Intention	WhatsApp	Finland	Enabler-inhibitor model
2	(Gan et al., 2024)	Personal factor (habit, excessive use) Self-judgement factor (exhaustion, regret)	Discontinuance Behaviour	WeChat	China	SCT
3	(Neves et al., 2024)	Privacy concerns	Intention to reduce SNS use	N/A	Portugal	SSO
4	(Zhang et al., 2024)	Push (information overload, system feature overload, and usage fatigue), Pull (privacy concerns), Mooring (sunk costs, transition costs, and transition fatigue)	Intermittent Discontinuance	WeChat Moments	China	PPM
5	(Olfat, 2023)	Excessive use, Privacy concern, Impression concern	Discontinuous Intention			SOR
6	(Pang & Ruan, 2023a)	Information overload, Communication overload, Exhaustion, Privacy Invasion	Discontinuous Usage Intention	N/A	China	CAC
7	(Pang & Ruan, 2023b)	Information overload, Communication overload, Information irrelevance, Exhaustion	Discontinuance Intention	WeChat	China	SSO
8	(Tan et al., 2023)	Technological conflicts, Dissatisfaction,	Discontinuance Intention	N/A	China	EDT
9	(Zhang, 2023)	Stressors (information	Discontinuance Usage Intention	WeChat Moment	China	SSO

		overload, social overload, system feature overload, privacy concerns, upward social comparison)				
10	(Fu & Li, 2022)	Technology overload, Information overload, Social overload	Reduced-use behaviour, and Abandoned-usage behaviour	Facebook	Finland	SCT
11	(Qaisar et al., 2022)	Information overload, Communication overload	Discontinuance Intention	N/A	China	CLT
12	(Fu et al., 2021)	Push factors (Facebook fatigue and dissatisfaction) Pull factor (alternative attractiveness) Mooring factors (personal norms and habit of using Facebook)	Discontinued Usage Behaviour	Facebook	Finland	PPM
13	(Masood et al., 2021)	Poor sleep quality	Discontinuance Intention	N/A	China	SSO
14	(J. Wang et al., 2021)	Regret (social overload, invasion of privacy) Inertia (social media habit, sunk costs, and affective commitment)	Discontinuance Intentions	N/A	China	A Two-Factor Model
15	(Xie & Tsai, 2021)	Advertising interference, Rumour dissemination, Information equivocality	Discontinuance Intention	Weibo	China	SOR
16	(Adhikari & Panda, 2020)	Self-efficacy, Usefulness, Privacy Concern, Ease-of Use	Discontinuance Usage Intention	N/A	India	LCM and UTAUT
17	(Cao et al., 2020)	Cyberbullying, Social overload, Distress, and Exhaustion	Discontinuous Intentions	N/A	Pakistan	SCT
18	(Fu et al., 2020)	Information overload, System feature overload, Social overload	Use Discontinuance	Facebook	Finland	SSO
19	(Lin et al., 2020)	Information overload,	Discontinuance Intentions	WeChat	China	SOR

		Communication overload, Social overload				
20	(Luqman et al., 2020)	Excessive social use, Excessive hedonic use, Excessive cognitive use	Discontinuance Intention	N/A	China	SOR
21	(Valensia, 2019)	Information overload, Fear of Missing Out, Privacy Concern	Discontinuance Intention	Instagram	Indonesia	N/A
22	(Wu et al., 2019)	Inconsistency, Information overload	Discontinued Intention of Attention	N/A	Chinese Taipei	EDT
23	(Cao & Sun, 2018)	Information overload, Communication overload, Social overload	Discontinuous Intentions	N/A	China	SOR
24	(Nawaz et al., 2018)	Social overload, Information overload, Exhaustion	Discontinuous Intentions	N/A	Pakistan	SSO
25	(Zhou et al., 2018)	System feature overload, Information overload	Discontinuance Intention	Weibo	China	CAC
26	(Zhang et al., 2016)	System feature fatigue, Information overload, Social overload	Discontinuous Usage Intention	Qzone	China	POT
27	(Maier et al., 2015)	Complexity, Uncertainty, Invasion, Disclosure, Pattern, Social overload	Discontinuous Usage Intention	Facebook	Germany	Technostress
28	(Turel, 2015)	Satisfaction, Habit, Self-efficacy, Guilt feelings	Discontinuance Intentions	Facebook	USA	SCT

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